



THE JOURNEY OF “HOLE IN THE CLOUDS”

Casey Church (Hole in the Clouds), Pokagon Band of Potawatomi

My journey began in the spring of 1988 while working with the Indian Workers Conference of the United Methodist Church in Michigan. Here I accepted God’s call to help lead a new approach to evangelize Native Americans. I learned all I could about the spiritual and religious ways of the Native peoples while pursuing a Bachelors degree in Cultural Anthropology. God made known to me His desire to see Native people find faith and freedom in Jesus within their own culture. Now I truly felt God accepting me as a Native American Christian. Before this time I strived to please God from another culture’s religious expectations.

A forerunner in contextual ministry, the late Rev. Jim McKenny, a Prairie Band of Potawatomi of Kansas, was my spiritual mentor and guide. With his encouragement, my wife Lora and I began a meeting in our home in Grand Rapids, Michigan called “The Open Door.”

songs. Musical groups like Rainsong, Cheryl Bear and Broken Walls are leading the way.

In 1997, little did we know that we would be establishing one of the first contextualized worship services in the country. In a rented facility, 50 Native people met to experience worshipping Jesus Christ from cultural expressions familiar to them in our new contextual ministry called “All Tribes Gathering.” Not only were songs adapted to our Native way, we also used a familiar preaching approach with story-telling. We further used contextual Native Christian cultural methods to conduct weddings, funerals, blessings, puberty rights of passage, prayers, the Lord’s Supper and baptisms with unique Native American expressions. We began to use our traditional sweat lodge ceremonies as prayer meetings for special occasions. It was during this time we met Richard Twiss, who was busy promoting contextual approaches to Native ministry in his “Many Nations, One Voice” conferences throughout the country.



Pastor Fern Cloud Sharing About Jesus and the Sacred Hoop (See page 16)

Pastor Casey Church of Thunderbird Ministries

We started to praise and worship Jesus Christ from within our “own” Native American cultural forms and expressions. We would begin our services by preparing ourselves for worship time by smudging, which is done by fanning sage smoke over ourselves as a symbolic way of cleansing. Further, we also used our traditional spiritual songs with the hand drum and flute. Today there are now several Native musicians creating Native praise and worship

Upon meeting and befriending Richard, we were invited to participate in these conferences and also to join the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies, where I contribute to their symposiums and their academic journal.

In Michigan I was taught to use the sacred pipe for prayer by Rev. Jim McKenny. I still use the pipe as an authentic expression of my Christian life both in community and personal prayer times. While in



Casey and Lora Church

Michigan we ministered to a city with approximately 2,000 Natives. Now God has called us to start a Native ministry in Albuquerque, New Mexico, a city with more than 35,000 Natives where we moved in July 2000. We are currently starting a new faith community on the west side of Albuquerque called “Thunderbird Ministry.” We have become a part of the Native community and have gained trust and friendship, which are the keys to reaching Native American people. Along with starting Thunderbird Ministry in Albuquerque, we also joined the “Wiconi International” family and have helped Richard and Katherine Twiss as staff with their Living Waters Family camp in Turner, Oregon and as their southwest representatives. God is using Living Waters Family Camp to change the face of Native Christianity in North America.

Throughout all these many years in ministry, Lora (a Navajo from New Mexico) and I (a Potawatomi from Michigan) have also managed to raise a young family of five children, four daughters and one son. Throughout our ministry years our children have become examples of how children can be raised to believe in Jesus Christ while also retaining their cultural and tribal identities as Native Americans. 🌐

For more information contact Casey Church at Lchurch111@comcast.net or by phone at 505-350-1390.

Healing the Sacred Hoop With Love and Respect

Fern Marie Cloud



Editor's Note: On July 4, 2010, the 219th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA opened in Minneapolis, MN with a worship service of 7,000 that included Pastor Fern Cloud dressed in her Native regalia, reflecting her commitment to seeing her people have the freedom to worship Jesus in a culturally meaningful way.

My Dakota name is Aikipawin, which means Branch Woman. I am the great-great granddaughter of Dakota Chief Little Crow. I was full of hatred for white people, the Church and God. I came to be a follower of Jesus on December 8, 1978. Creator used a near-death experience and the testimony of Native believers to finally break down my resistance to His love.

I wanted my people to know Creator's love, too. But I knew that the typical approach to reaching Native people was never going to work. What my people were looking for was genuine love and respect, someone who actually was in touch with their culture and beliefs and acted on it. It has taken me almost 20 years to figure this out. I had to start with myself, to reconnect with the person God created me to be, and then I had to learn to embrace that person with love and acceptance. I understand the intergenerational trauma Native people live with. Most importantly, I know the power of love.

I have been active in contextual ministry since 1990, with our ministry called “Healing the Sacred Hoop” or “Healing the Circle of Life.” I am a cultural consultant traveling all over the U.S., and internationally sharing our experiences as a Native Christian reaching Native people through culturally relevant ministry.

Our faith in Jesus is a way of life; like the circle, it is inclusive. I describe my life as a Native minister, as one who reads the Bible and then expresses that knowledge and teachings in a way that the people I serve can relate to, through our own God-given culture.

The ones who really need to hear the gospel message will never come to church, so we go to them. My family and I are powwow dancers. We dance our prayers with the people. This sends the message that, “Yes, you can be a Christian and still enjoy the culture of your people.” We are also artists in schools, presenting the students with biblical principles through cultural teachings. We use the hoop to tell the story of how our spirit gets broken and that there is only one person who can heal that broken hoop and that is Wakan Tanka, God in our language. My family and I have been language activists, teaching our language through prayer and songs. When I interviewed with the elders for the pastor position here, they said that I have full control, but they will only sing in the Dakota language. Of course I was more than pleased to comply.

We know that our people have lost connection to who they are as a people. I realize that culture will not save them, but God has given us the wisdom to use our culture to start the healing process.

Jesus said that greater love has no person that one who would lay their life down for their friends; I have laid my life down for my people by allowing Creator to use my life to show my people how good He is and express the truth that “Jesus is the answer.” 🌐

Fern Marie Cloud is the pastor of Pejubutazizi Dakota Presbyterian Church, located on the Upper Sioux Community near Granite Falls, MN. You may contact her by phone: 320-564-4954